



Visit of a priest to an early Catholic settlement.
(Used with permission, The Catholic Conference of Ohio.)

In spite of the hardships, Father Machebeuf wrote to his sister in France, that he was thriving on frontier life, that he was in excellent health, "had gotten fat," and was pleasantly surprised that "even the Protestant settlers were well-disposed" toward him. He concluded by saying that he would not return to Europe "for all the gold in the world."

Hardy folk, these first Ohioans.

Families banding together to establish settlements were often bound by a common faith, as well as other factors, such as national origin or by being interrelated. Thus, they were natural cores for the formation of churches. They also tended to draw newcomers of similar religious beliefs to their particular area, as considerable hostility for persons of other beliefs was common. In fact, *The Catholic Telegraph* remarked in 1833 that, "We live in the midst of a people who have been taught to look upon us with suspicion."

Perhaps this was the reason why a strong and active Catholic community existed in Stonelick Valley, a remote place even today. Why should the County's first Catholic parish not have been in one of its larger towns? Bustling New Richmond, the County's major river port, would seem to have been a more logical candidate, as would Milford, a thriving commercial center. The reasons are the stuff of conjecture, lost in the proverbial mists of history.

Settlers lived, for the most part, in isolation. Yet, unlike their rural counterparts in Europe, most first generation settlers had considerable exposure. They were, after all, well traveled, many having come from Europe and across the eastern part of the new continent. They were eager for contacts from beyond their own communities, and especially hungry for the exercise of the faith, coming with the infrequent visits of missionary priests.

Father Machebeuf wrote that whenever he visited the settlements in the woods, "where most of the Catholics were," he wore "old clothes." He added that he dressed "a little better in town so as not to give occasion to disrespectful comment, which might be made by Protestants if they were to see a Catholic priest shabbily dressed."

Whenever he reached a settlement, the usual practice was for the first family he encountered to send out one of the children to announce his arrival to the neighbors. Great excitement ensued. Work stopped. People gathered quickly to celebrate the sacraments, especially Baptism, Penance and the Eucharist.

When his visit was the first visit, he reported that it also caused some concern to the settlers. "Their conveniences for receiving visitors are limited, and they think the priest is some extraordi-



Missionary priests on horseback brought the sacraments to the congregation at Stonelick prior to the establishment of St. Philomena Church, in 1839.
(Georgeanne and Tracey Ottaway)

nary person who should not put up with ordinary things." Later visits seldom resulted in any embarrassment.

It is not difficult to visualize such a visit to the Catholic community of Stonelick Valley.

It is summer. The hills which spared the valley the cruel winter winds now trap the still, humid air. There is little sound save the drone of insects and the distant sigh of a two-man saw. Household chores are in progress. Cattle graze placidly in the clearings which nurture heavy growth of native grasses.

On the trail which will later be Stonelick-Williams Corner Road, a lone horseman rides slowly northward from the Cincinnati-Wooster Road. The trail alternates in its surface. Now the hooves raise puffs of dust, now droplets of mud. The rider is clad in black. On the horse's flank there is a long, black bag. It contains chalice, vestments, holy water, chrism, and other necessary items. In the shade of a great, ancient sycamore, he pauses to watch a hawk spiral upward on a rising current. Another solitary traveler, he muses.

Sight of him has been caught by a woman tending a wash boiler. Quickly she calls to a neighbor across the stream, who signals with a bell carefully brought from her homeland. Before the priest has secured his mount to a nearby rail fence, a dozen have assembled. Within minutes, ten more. He is shown great reverence and warmly welcomed. His own greeting takes a familiar form. Perspiration glistening on his brow in the merciless mid-day sun, he raises his right hand in the universal symbol of benediction.

"In nomine patris...."